

The “Holy Land”—birthplace of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—today engenders not peace but conflict.

Holy Land: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East

A 16mm sound film or videocassette—25 minutes



As the “cradle of civilization” and the setting for the Koran, the Hebrew Bible, and the New Testament, the “holy land” of the Middle East still inspires awe in those who live and visit there. Today, however, the common ground that binds Jews, Muslims, and Christians engenders not peace but conflict. If we examine the shifting identity of what is now the State of Israel and once was Canaan, Israel, Judea, and Palestine; and if we examine the rise and endurance of Islam, which still dominates the Middle East yet has tolerated minorities in its midst, we will better understand the Holy Land’s less than holy conflict.

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Holy Land

Traces the history of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity—the monotheistic religions that arose from the “holy land” of the Middle East.

Chronicles the shifting identity of what is now the State of Israel and once was Canaan, Israel, Judea, and Palestine.

Discusses the rise and endurance of Islam, which through the Arabic language still dominates the Middle East.

Suggests that much of the conflict of today’s Middle East is based on age-old religious ties to common ground.



Content Summary

“Get thee out of thy country . . . unto a land that I will show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great.” According to the Bible God spoke to the shepherd Abraham some four thousand years ago and Abraham led his family to the “Holy Land”—then the Land of Canaan, now the State of Israel. There where Judaism, Christianity, and Islam began, and throughout the Middle East, religion is still a way of life; church and state are not separate but one. Much of the conflict in the Middle East today, however, is based on age-old religious ties to the common ground.

Abraham, the leader of a Semitic tribe later called the Hebrews, led his family to Canaan. His descendents fled from a famine there to Egypt, where centuries later they were exiled to wander in the Sinai desert. There God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, the Hebrews became the Israelites (after Abraham’s grandson Jacob, also known as Israel), and much later, in 1020 BC, they returned to Canaan to establish the Kingdom of Israel.

United for one hundred years under the reign of Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, the kingdom thrived. Then it broke into two: Israel in the north, Judah in the south. (From *Judah* was derived *Judaism*, and the Israelites henceforth were known as the Jews.) Assyria then conquered Israel. Judah fell to Babylon. And so on. One foreign invader after another occupied the region until the advent of Zionism in the late nineteenth century—a movement that led many Jews back to their “promised land,” spurred the British to withdraw in 1947, and in 1948 culminated in the creation of the State of Israel.

There is, however, a people besides the Jews with an ancient claim to the Holy Land. When the Israelites came out of the desert to conquer Canaan, they found the Philistines, who had settled on the Mediterranean coast of Canaan a century earlier. Soon thwarted by the Israelites in their attempt to expand inland, the Philistines retreated to the coast, to “Philistia.” Rome later invaded the Kingdom of Israel, naming it Judea, and then—to erase the Jewish link from the land—“Palestina,” or “Palestine.” In the seventh century Arab Muslims conquered Palestine and with it its non-Jewish residents—the Palestinians—who gradually embraced Islam.

In the early days of Islam, the Muslims faced not Mecca but Jerusalem when they prayed. And the Dome of the Rock, from which Muhammad is said to have made his “night journey” to heaven, stands on the same site as the ruin of the Temple of Solomon—destroyed by the Romans AD 70 and thereafter revered by the Jews. But Islam began not in Jerusalem but on the Arabian Peninsula, in the town of Mecca, where an Arab merchant named Muhammad was impelled by a vision to recite the word of God. In the year 622 Muhammad emigrated to Medina to organize the rival bedouin tribes, who believed in many gods, into a community of *Islam*, united by one god. Muhammad laid down the law for the Muslims as Moses had done for the Jews—laws that, as the word of God revealed in the Koran, governed every act of daily life and but for Israel still govern the Middle East.

Christianity, the third religion born in the Holy Land, was founded on the belief that Jesus was the Son of God. The formal religion emerged about AD 40 in the Syrian Church of Antioch, the church from which Saint Maroun set out about AD 400 to found the Maronite Church in Lebanon. In the year 45 the Coptic Church—now the largest Christian Church in the Middle East—emerged in Alexandria, Egypt. Although the Copts and the Maronites are but two of some dozen branches of Middle Eastern Christianity, they, unlike the others, wield power in today’s political arena.

Because of Islam and the isolation of the Middle East, Christianity there has changed little. And because Islam is the last of the three monotheistic faiths—and so, according to the Muslims, the last and complete version of God’s message to humanity—Judaism and Christianity pose no threat. All three, after all, arose from common ground.

The Middle East Series

The Middlemen: The Pivotal Role of the Middle East (color no. 4001)

At the center of the known world for centuries, the Middle East was a geographical, commercial, ethnic, and religious crossroads. And Middle Easterners were the world's "middlemen"—an ethnocultural blend the elements of which illuminate both the Middle Eastern sensibility and the region's current instability.

The Torchbearers: Bridging the Dark Ages (color no. 4002)

Coincident with the Dark Ages in Europe, Islamic civilization in the Middle East reached its peak. Had Middle Eastern scholars not rediscovered, synthesized, and advanced the knowledge of antiquity, thus laying the groundwork for further exploration and discovery, the European Renaissance and Western civilization as we now know it might never have been.

Holy Land: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Middle East (color no. 4003)

As the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—three of the world's great monotheistic religions—the Middle East has come to be known as the "Holy Land," yet despite the reverence and awe this region's history inspires, disputes based on long-standing religious claims to the land continue to rend its contemporary fabric.

Family Matters: The Role of the Family in the Middle East (color no. 4004)

Traditionally the model upon which social and political life has been based, the large, extended, and patriarchal Middle Eastern family has begun to fragment under Western influence. Although rapid westernization has benefited many, fundamentalists have tried to save the old society by reviving traditional ways, thus heightening regional tensions.

New Frontiers: The Middle East following World War I (color no. 4005)

The nation-states of the Middle East that today wage war for territory and power did not exist before World War I. By creating artificial frontiers and introducing the alien concept of nationalism, a concept that superseded the traditional Middle Eastern identity based on family and religion, certain Western powers may unknowingly have set the stage for today's conflicts.

Captains and Kings: Authority in the Middle East (color no. 4006)

Compelled by ancient precedents and the tenets of Islam to accept authoritarian rule, Middle Eastern nations (except for Turkey, Lebanon, and Israel, each of which is marred by factionalism and religious strife) have resisted the imposition of Western-style governments and still sanction the military regime or the monarchy.

Sects and Violence: Fragmentation within Religions (color no. 4007)

Although sectarian differences between Jews, Christians, and Muslims are a main ingredient of Middle East tensions, the struggle for power and territory is also rife among divergent sects within each faith who are trying to legitimize their religious beliefs and principles.

Ancient and Modern: The Fall and Rise of the Middle East (color no. 4008)

In this century Middle Eastern independence and oil wealth have reversed the region's downward trend that began, ironically, in the midst of Europe's rebirth. State-of-the-art technology has not, however, replaced tradition; the two coexist in an uneasy alliance.

The Story of Oil: Chief Economic Resource of the Middle East (color no. 4009)

Beneath the sand and rock of the Middle East lie two-thirds of the world's known oil reserves. An object of exploitation since ancient times and a cause of current tension within and without the Middle East, oil has nonetheless brought great wealth—though unequally distributed—to a poor region.

Independence: Egypt & Algeria (color no. 4010)

Between the first and second world wars the Middle East moved from a religious and familial consciousness into one that was national and secular. Triggered in part by the decline of European colonial power, this shift effected the independence of Egypt and Algeria after World War II.

Homeland: Israel & Palestine (color no. 4011)

Promised to both the Arabs and the Jews by the British and partitioned by the United Nations into two states, Palestine, which became the independent State of Israel in 1948, is still the object of a protracted struggle between Israelis and Palestinian nationalists, both of whom maintain ancient claims to the territory.

Revolution: Iraq & Iran (color no. 4012)

Since World War II internal political revolutions in such countries as Iraq and Iran have been a salient feature of Middle East politics. Caused in part by postwar economic instability and the withdrawal of colonial powers, the initial unrest was largely a response to Western exploitation.

Change: Turkey & Saudi Arabia (color no. 4013)

Opposites on an ideological spectrum, Turkey and Saudi Arabia best illustrate how nonviolent change has affected the Middle East since World War I. Saudi Arabia entered the modern age with its Arab, Islamic soul intact; Turkey cast aside its heritage to modernize only to draw opposition from traditionalists over the heavy cost of progress.

Identity: Lebanon (color no. 4014)

The religious and civil dissension that has beset Lebanon since the withdrawal of the French in 1946 began with a national identity crisis. Because the Lebanese embody all the elements that now determine the Middle Eastern identity, their recent history may be read as a history in microcosm of twentieth-century Middle East instability.



For Discussion

1. Summarize the history of Judaism. What names has the State of Israel gone by? How has each of these names described the land's shifting identity? What is Zionism? How did it lead to the creation of the State of Israel? Why do the Jews of Israel so vigorously defend their right to exist as a nation-state?
2. Where did the Philistines come from? Where in what is now Israel did they first settle? Why did the Romans translate "Philistia"—the name of the Philistines' Mediterranean coastal habitat—into "Palestina" and apply it to all of Judea? What is the basis of today's conflict between the Jews and the Palestinians? Why has it come to a head only recently?
3. Why is the City of Jerusalem important to Muslims? Where and when did Islam emerge? Why was Muhammad's revelation a threat to the native way of life? Why did Islam spread throughout the Middle East with such great speed? Why do Islam and the Arabic language still dominate the Middle East?
4. Where did the Christian religion first surface? Who are the Maronites? The Copts? Why has Middle Eastern Christianity remained whole and powerful? Why has it changed so little?
5. Explain this statement: "[Muslims] refer to Christians and Jews as 'the people of the Book'."
6. Why have Judaism and Christianity posed no threat to Islam?

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